

HalfLife War in the Shadows

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1. Chapter 1 Emergence

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Chapter I - Emergence

A cool breeze rustled the edges of the hood pulled up over the young man's head as he watched the street across the canal through a pair of binoculars. The soft stir of air had swept through the twisted and winding streets of the city from the ocean, what was left of it, and, just moments earlier, had touched the wiry frame of an old man, his long ex-army greatcoat hanging loose about his thin frame, as he stood next to a solitary phone booth.

It was a cold September evening, and Garret Jukes stood leaning against the doorframe leading out on to the small balcony of the ninth floor apartment. He watched the old man carefully, his young face stern, unreadable. He was thinking.

The old man was alone, and Garret hadn't noticed anybody else in the small crowd of people milling about the street paying any particular attention to him.

He squinted as he stared through the binoculars. His comrade, a pale-skinned young man just slightly older than himself, stood beside him, his weight resting on the barrel of a long and deadly looking sniper rifle.

"You see him?" Donovan asked, his narrowed gaze fixed on the same old man Garret was studying.

Garret didn't bother to remove the binoculars from his face. "Yeah," he responded. "I see him. He's alone. Go ahead, take up a firing

position. Once I'm sure, and if we get the chance, take the shot."

Donovan grinned and dropped to his belly, deploying the slender legs of the bipod from the body of the M24 sniper rifle. Adjusting his position slightly, he steadied his aim and stared intently through the 10X Leupold-Stewens M3 Ultra telescopic sight fitted to the top of the weapon.

Taking his eyes from the binoculars, Garret gestured inside to get the attention of one of the other occupants of the small apartment. Alexei, sitting cross-legged on the bed, a small computer resting in his lap with what seemed like a dozen wires running from it, half to the wall, half to a similar number of electronic devices positioned around him, looked up from his work.

"You going to be able to get all of this?" Garret inquired, genuine concern apparent in his voice.

Alexei just nodded and casually leaned over and flicked a few switches on one of the many machines scattered across the bed. A row of LED lights blinked to life along the top of it, signalling that it was functioning properly.

Without another word, Garret withdrew a small cell phone-like device from his jacket pocket and punched in a few numbers with his thumb. He put the phone to his ear and waited.

"It's ringing," Donovan said. "He just looked over at the phone." There was a pause. "Wait a second. Why won't he answer it?"

Garret frowned and lifted the binoculars to his eyes again. "I don't know," he said. "He's looking at it, like he wants to answer it. Every second for him is a long time, and I can't help but wonder why."

"He's got no reason to be nervous," said Alexei from back inside the apartment. "He knows who it is, or he thinks he knows anyways."

Nodding, Garret continued to study the old man, still thinking.

He knew what the old man was. Not only was he a Combine sympathiser, he was also a high-ranking official within one of the primary Resistance Cells, a leader in the Command Rings.

The man was a traitor, and Garret had proof. Alexei had tapped the bastard's phone, he'd heard him talking to Civil Protection Officers, heard him discuss the finer points of his "defection".

Alexei had those conversations recorded, copies of them now stored on a small compact disc that the latest conversation would then be added to. Garret would get final confirmation of the man's treachery, he'd instruct Donovan to execute him, Alexei would record the conversation to the disc, a copy of the disc would be mailed to Resistance High Command, and another delivered to the Combine itself. The intelligence agents would get the disc, read the message attached, and, as always, that message would go unheeded.

And so the cycle of life and death continued.

The man finally entered the phone booth and picked up the receiver.

The conversation lasted less than 30 seconds.

Garret ended the call and looked down at Donovan. "Don't bother," he said, his voice just barely more than a whisper.

"What?" Donovan responded abruptly, looking up from the scope.

"I said don't worry about it."

Garret entered the apartment and grabbed his submachine gun, a modern weapon of Russian origin, a PP-2000, from the bed. He cocked the small weapon and placed it in a specially designed holster inside his jacket.

"Where are you going?" Donovan called after him as Garret moved to the door.

"There was something wrong just now, about that old man," Garret said after he'd peeked outside to make sure the hallway was clear.

Donovan rolled his eyes. "Damn right there was something wrong. I could have shot him, you know. It was an easy shot, and in full view of at least two dozen civilians and a patrol of Metro Cops, not to mention God knows how many scanners. It would have been perfect. We'd have had our example. Besides, we know he's guilty. He thought he just made contact with his Civil Protection controller. We have it on tape. We have fucking confirmation that he's a spy and a traitor. So what the hell is the problem?"

"I know, and I'm sorry. But, like I said, there was something wrong just now. Every second for that man is a very long time, and I don't know about you, but I'm a little curious as to why."

"What's it matter?" Alexei questioned from the bed, already packing up his equipment.

"As always, the difference between life and death."

Donovan just rolled his eyes with a sigh. "Come on, Garret. Surely not from you, of all people."

Garret fixed Donovan with a stare that made the other man shift his gaze downward abruptly. "Meet me at the foot of that bridge in three hours. Don't bother bringing your rifle. Alexei, copy all the information we've gathered and send it to High Command. Use the usual channels."

With that, Garret left the room, stalking off down the corridor, leaving his comrades in the apartment somewhat confused. That 30 second conversation had given him a lot to think about.

2. Chapter 2 Another Couple of Bodies

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Chapter II - Just Another Couple of Bodies

Donovan couldn't help but sneer slightly as he saw Garret approaching through the sheets of rain that were obscuring the view of everything that wasn't directly in front of his face. He'd been with Garret and his team for a few months now, and he'd actually grown to respect the young and enigmatic leader of the troop. But this latest decision of to not have the old defector killed? Donovan was simply having a hard time swallowing that.

But that didn't mean he was any less respectful, or mindful, of just what kind of a person Garret was, or was rumoured to be. Most of what Donovan did know about Garret was hearsay and conjecture, but it followed the young man around like a shadow nonetheless.

Apparently, Garret's mentor had been the obscure and almost unknown, save for few scarce rumours, figure that went by the name of Kind David. Theories ran rampant about just who and what David was, or had been prior to the Combine invasion, but the rumour mill seemed to consistently state that he was some kind of former intelligence agent for one of the "big companies".

In Donovan's mind, that meant FBI, CIA, MI5, MI6, KGB, GRU, any one of those, or possibly some other government organization he had failed to remember. He had heard of a few ex-intelligence community guys, spooks, turning up in the Resistance, looking to help out, but he'd never met any of them himself.

Of course, Donovan had heard of Garret by reputation, or at least bits and pieces of it, but had only just met him recently in a safe house outside the city a few months back. Garret had been about to go in to "interrogate" a captured Civil Protection Officer, and Donovan had been asked if he wanted to "sit in" on the proceedings.

There had been a totally of five people in the room; Garret, Donovan, another soldier, some guy who'd claimed to be a Lieutenant in the Resistance, and the Civil Protection Officer, who had been stripped and looked like the guards had already given him a rough time.

Donovan remembered Garret being the only occupant who hadn't at some point or another emptied the contents of his stomach onto the cold concrete floor of the basement cellar. It became very clear to Donovan just how and why the term "sadist" keep surfacing in the rumours he'd heard about the young man.

The methods and "procedures" he'd witnessed Garret perform on the hapless prisoner had been disturbing, at the very least.

Donovan had expected a sort of textbook beating, maybe even with a textbook of some kind. At worst, he'd expect to see some bones broken. But nothing could have prepared him for the frightening calm savagery exhibited by Garret as he "worked the subject".

In that long and gruesome interrogation session, Donovan had seen perhaps the worst things that one human could do to another.

He'd seen the streams of blood as fingers were not only broken, but also sliced clean off.

He'd heard the screams of unimaginable pain as eyelids had been removed with razor blades.

He'd smelled the stench of burned flesh as cigarettes had been pushed deep into exposed eye sockets.

He'd felt the pool of blood grow larger as it ran past his boots to disappear into the drain on the other side of the cellar.

He'd tasted the fear that hung in the air as Garret drew his sidearm and levelled it at the man's battered forehead.

There was no doubts in Donovan's mind just how effective Garret was, but there was also no doubt just how sick and twisted the young man could be. The kid was good though, very good, and good enough to lead a team of highly specialized and highly trained individuals.

If anything, Donovan was more curious as to just who, or what, could have possibly made Garret into the creature the young man had become.

However, in the meantime, he would try to decipher the reason why he hadn't been allowed to shoot the old man, and why he was now standing at the foot of a lonely bridge, in the middle of the night, soaking wet.

Garret walked up to Donovan, his hood pulled low over his face, obscuring his features in shadow. "I hope you don't mind the weather," Garret said, his voice drowned out slightly by the pouring rain.

"You knew it was going to rain tonight," Donovan shot back, immediately annoyed at Garret's use of his trademark sarcasm. "Why the fuck are we out here?"

Even through the sheets of rain, Donovan could see the grin across the other man's lips. "Because of the rain. If it were a nice night, people would be out, and the Combine would be running tighter patrols. After tonight, it isn't supposed to rain for a few more weeks. This is the only chance I'll have."

Donovan gave Garret a puzzled look. "Chance for what?"

"To meet with that old man and see just what the hell is going on."

His eyes narrowed, and Donovan fixed Garret with a stare. "Just what did he say to you during that rather short phone call anyways?"

Shaking his head, Garret responded, "Nothing. Call this a hunch. But, quiet. I think there is someone coming."

Donovan's hand went immediately to the pistol tucked at the small of his back, but Garret had already moved around and behind him, advancing out on to the bridge to meet the new figure coming through the rain from the opposite side of the bridge.

"Don't do anything," Garret called back to Donovan. "Just stay there

and let me handle this."

As the figure came closer, Garret drew his submachine gun and levelled it at the stranger's chest.

"Hold it right there," Garret called out.

The stranger froze, Garret seizing the opportunity to move closer, the barrel of the small weapon never wavering from its target. The stranger raised his hands slowly, surrendering and showed that he was completely unarmed. Garret moved quickly, reaching inside the stranger's jacket, withdrawing the small form of a compact pistol, a Makarov PM that he quickly dropped into one of the many pockets of his own jacket.

"I take it you aren't with Civil Protection then," the stranger said as he tossed back the hood of his own jacket, revealing the face of the old man. "Which means this meeting is likely to be something more of an execution than an extraction."

"That all depends on what you decide to tell me," Garret said as he withdrew his own deadly looking pistol from the folds of his long jacket, the long, thick length of a silencer attached to the muzzle of the weapon. He levelled it at the old man's chest as he quickly concealed the SMG in his other hand in one of the deep pockets of his jacket.

The old man eyed the weapons carefully. "You are definitely not Civil Protection. I've never once seen any Metro Cops using any Russian equipment, least of all that particular submachine gun. Also, there is that pistol of yours, a Browning. Not too common, or so I find. So you are Resistance then? Unless of course you have a particular attachment to unique weaponry."

"My fascination comes and goes," Garret responded, cocking back the hammer of the weapon, grinning inwardly as the old man twitched slightly from the sound. "Now, I'm going to ask you some questions, and you're going to answer them honestly. I don't really think I need to make any further threats now, do I?"

"You've made all the threats you need to, I think, my friend."

Garret nodded. "Consider yourself fortunate. Normally I rarely get to the point of making threats, or asking questions for that matter." Garret gestured over his shoulder at the obscured form of Donovan, "Earlier on today, that man had a sniper rifle aimed directly at your head. On my order, he could have shot you dead in the middle of the street, and, as always, we would have gotten away with it."

"So, you are not Civil Protection, and I doubt the Resistance would execute a civilian, even a traitor, in broad daylight." The old man seemed puzzled, as if he were thinking. "So who are you then?"

"That doesn't matter," Garret shot back, edging closer to the old man. "On the phone you mentioned something, something about having contacts amongst the highest level of the Resistance, people you could turn, or have turned. You said you'd need help. I want to know who you were talking about, names, ranks, everything."

Smiling, the old man bowed his head and slowly turned around.

"Hey!" Garret shouted at him.

"You'll get no answers from me, my friend," and with that, the old man began to walk away from Garret, disappearing into the rain.

Garret heard the sound of footsteps behind him. Donovan was running towards Garret, his weapon drawn. "Jesus Christ, Garret! You're just going to let him go?"

"No chance."

The report of the bullet was all but completely extinguished by the roar of the rain, as well as the silencer. Donovan watched as the back of the old man's head exploded outwards in a cloud of blood and bone. The old man went limp, like a puppet that had just had its string cut, and fell to the ground.

"Do we both dumping the body?" Donovan asked Garret as the two of them walked forward to stand over the corpse of the traitor.

Garret stood there for a moment, staring down at the mess that had been the old man's head. "No, I don't think so. Someone will find him tomorrow and report it to Civil Protection. They'll be able to recognize the face easily enough. Has Alexei sent that disc out yet?"

Donovan shook his head. "He was going to wait until you got back from this little 'meeting.' Why? Are you going to add some more information or something to the disc?"

"No," replied Garret as he turned around and began walking off into the rain, Donovan following suite.

"Just what was said back in the apartment? What were you guys just talking about? Alexei wouldn't tell me after you left, said something about not needing to know."

Garret stopped and stared at Donovan. For a moment, Garret contemplated telling the other man about the potential defectors, about just what had been said. Then he thought better of it. He neither liked, nor trusted Donovan all that much. The man had been a former soldier in the Resistance before some bright spark had thought it would be smart to send regular soldiers out with the Intelligence Teams. The official story behind this was that the teams, who were civilians, would have some level of protection. Garret knew full well that this wasn't the case, and that the Brass just wanted to keep an eye on a faction amongst their ranks they didn't entirely trust, or control.

Well, Garret didn't trust the Brass all that much either, and less so now. No, Donovan wouldn't need to be told a thing.

"He was right," Garret said after a moment. "You don't need to know."

"Oh bullshit!" shouted Donovan as he reached a hand out to grab hold of Garret's jacket.

Whatever he had been about to say was suddenly replaced by a shriek of pain. Garret had seen the action and reacted by shooting his own hand up and out, grabbing Donovan's thumb, and twisting it backwards, breaking it with a loud snap, hushed by the rain.

"You're off the team," said Garret without emotion as Donovan sank to his knees, clutching his hand to his chest, biting down hard on his lower lip.

"Go to hell!" shouted Donovan as he leapt up, his weapon clutched in his still useable hand.

It was too late, Garret had anticipated such an action, and reacted swiftly. He shot his left hand out, pushing Donovan's weapon hand upwards. Less than a second later, he'd drawn the Makarov, the one he'd taken off the old man, and fired three shots. Two caught Donovan in the chest, the third in the forehead, just off centre.

"Should have just stayed down," he muttered to the corpse at his feet.

Garret didn't wait around for too long. Quickly, he ran back to the dead body of the old man, placing the Makarov in one of corpse's already stiffening hands.

It was a ridiculous set-up, and Garret knew it, but he didn't care. There was no CSI these days. Civil Protection was the only police force, and they wouldn't care about two more dead humans, it's what they wanted.

As for the death of Donovan, which the Resistance would no doubt learn of, Garret could explain that away easy enough. He could claim the execution went wrong; the old man had pulled a gun and shot Donovan. Garret had then shot the old man and fled the scene. Simple. Easy. No one would question it.

Just another couple of bodies in a world that was already full of them.

As for the old man and the supposed defectors amongst the Resistance, that required a bit more careful thought. What if the old man was right? What could Garret do?

A few years ago, he would have gone straight to the top, demanding to know who amongst the Brass, or their staff, was planning to defect, but it wasn't a few years ago, and Garret certainly wasn't that stupid. No, he was handling a live grenade, and it would blow up in his hands the second he approached the Brass about it.

If he were wrong, he'd be detained, and likely killed.

And if he were right, he'd meet his fate in some dark alleyway.

As Garret stalked off down the street, leaving the bridge and the bodies behind, he turned the information he'd been given over in his head time and time again, trying to decide just what to do about it. It was times like this, he wished he could go and seek out David, ask the older man's advice.

No, that would be pointless. Garret, though he missed the old man, didn't need David around anymore. The former spook had taught his young protégé everything he needed to know, turned Garret into the deadly little automaton he was.

Eventually, Garret would arrive at the logical conclusion, but how many more people would have to die before he found the truth?

3. Chapter 3 Red Tape

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Chapter III "Red Tape"

After a few years serving in the Resistance, Garret was used to getting chewed out by Major Solomon, or any one of the Brass. Not that he enjoyed it, of course.

"You're a loose cannon!" the Major screamed, his face flushed red in anger. Apparently he wasn't all that happy with having the corpse of a civilian and a Resistance soldier to deal with.

Garret just sneered. He realized the Major was more pissed off more at the fact that he'd have to deal with the paperwork surrounding the corpses of the old man and Donovan than he was at the fact that they were in fact corpses now.

Paperwork. Somehow more than half the planet's population had been annihilated and still bureaucrats managed to thrive, even in some small, half-assed, underground guerilla organization like the Resistance.

Maybe I should check in with the Boss about having some of those pencil-pushing pinheads taken out, Garret thought to himself. How hard would it be to arrange for a handful of desk-jockeys to have a few unfortunate accidents, or plant evidence that would lead to an investigation amongst their ranks?

He'd have to file that idea away for further review. For the time being, he had the Major to contend with.

With his tirade finished, the Major lowered his gaze, sighed, and fell back into his chair with a groan. "Just tell me the guy you killed was worth the death of one of our men, that's all I ask."

Garret did his best to suppress a smile. He personally thought Donovan, and the rest of the overly zealous Resistance "Freedom Fighters" were worth little more than cannon fodder, but he knew he'd do well to hold his tongue. "I'd say so," he responded as he withdrew a crumpled pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his leather jacket. He lit one and watched with distant fascination as the slim blue tendrils of smoke spiraled upwards from his thin lips. "The man I shot was a defector. And don't worry, I've got proof, and you'll have my full report tomorrow. Alexei, one of my guys, is taking care of it. As for Donovan, it was his own idiocy that got him killed. Didn't even bother to search the guy. Oh well. Shit happens."

The Major obviously didn't care. Unlike the vast majority of the

Resistance, he'd actually been in the Army before the Combine invasion. He was used to commanding fighting men who knew what they were doing, which was a far cry from the ragtag bunch of rebels he now commanded. Garret almost sympathized with the man. Almost.

"Yeah, shit happens," the Major agreed, taking an offered cigarette from Garret's pack. "You get any more leads off the guy?"

Garret shook his head, declining to comment on the information he'd acquired about defectors and traitors amongst other Resistance cells. "No, Sir, I don't. But, a new team is rotating out into the field, a couple of sting operations. It's a good idea, but it's not my control. Maybe they'll have better luck."

A nod. "Well, you and your boys did some good work while you were out there."

That took Garret by surprise. It was rare for the Major to offer compliments or congratulations, unless he was buttering you up.

"What new assignment have you got for me?" Garret inquired, beating him to the punch.

The Major tossed a manila folder on the desk in front of Garret. "We're launching an offensive into the downtown core. Not as overt as you might think though."

"So you're finally learning you can't take the Combine in a standup fight?"

The Major sneered. "It's not that at all. I have supreme confidence in the men and women and their resolve to win against all odds. But we're not strong enough yet, we need more troops, and better intelligence."

Garret knew full well that while the first statement had been true, the second had been a stab at the civilian intelligence teams. The Major was probably one of the many members of the Resistance Brass that wanted the teams under their immediate control. Problem was that it wasn't going to happen, at least as long as Garret had any say in it.

"Regardless," the Major continued, stopping Garret from saying anything to the contrary. "We're going to make a covert, yet heavy push towards the downtown, out past the river. Our objective will be to establish a larger control zone so we can launch offensives deeper into the city and surrounding suburbs as well as tie up the Combine with a larger front."

"Makes sense," Garret conceded. "What do you need us for then?"

The Major sighed, and Garret got the distinct impression the man was about to admit something he wished he didn't have to. "We are tragically short of trained snipers and demolition men. We're up to our eyeballs in rocket launchers and charges, and while just about everyone has trained on them or used them, few are any good."

Ah, so that was it. The bastard wanted some support. They must be

really short of men. "Be that as it may, I thought your snipers were doing a great job?"

"Ha!" the Major exclaimed. "They're all pretty much chicken shit, and can't shoot worth a damn. They're good at harassment fire, keeping the enemy pinned down, morale cutters, but not much more. And this is the fucking Combine, they can practically inject their troopers with morale if they need to."

"So why the hell do you need us? And what's this about demolitions?"

The Major reached out and flipped open the manila folder that Garret had ignored, tapping a handful of grainy photographs held together with a paperclip. "What do you see here?"

Garret leaned forward, studying the photographs. "Whoever took these can't work a camera worth shit. But, uh, I think I'm looking at empty streets."

The Major snorted. "Take a closer look."

Leaning in further, Garret squinted at the images, trying to make out details amongst the distortion and blur. "Ah, I see. Concealed machinegun positions. And, from the looks of it, they've got some heavy armour rolling around just out of sight. They've probably got some Synths as well, and camouflaged at that. Hmm, Clever."

Folding his arms across his chest, the Major nodded. "We need those taken out as we advance. Consider any other projects you may have had no longer your responsibility. We're already set to go and will be moving out in a week. All the information we have is in that folder. Anything else we can give you, we will."

"Wait a second," Garret said, closing the folder. "You want us to go bunker busting and Synth hunting?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

Garret just shook his head, smiling. "Man, you've got to be shitting me. We're not soldiers."

The Major smiled. "But you do make good assassins in a pinch. Despite the fact you all may be civilians, you are all very well trained, or damn lucky. Personally, I don't care which one it is. The point is that it will be easier if we slip small groups of men and materiel in ahead of the main force to take out any potential, uh, obstacles when we make our initial push to the downtown core."

"I'm not going to go up against a fucking Synth! Not a single one of us will!"

"You can and you will!" the Major said, slamming his hands down on the desk. Almost immediately thereafter he straightened up and regained his composure slightly. "This isn't a suicide mission. You've got all the intelligence you'll need, and you have a week to get any more should you feel you require it. I'm giving you complete access to our weapons lockers and equipment stores. Take what you need. Dismissed."

Garret collected to folder and got up to leave, tossing the Major a mock salute as he did so, cursing under his breath.

Alexei was waiting outside the door, leaning against the wall smoking a cigarette.

"So, what's the word?" he asked Garret as his comrade emerged from the Major's office.

Garret tossed him the manila folder as they walked down the long hallway of the apartment complex that served as the Resistance Cell's headquarters for the time being. "Did you send Robert the data file?"

Alexei nodded as he leafed through the folder. "Yeah, why?"

"Tell him I want first level surveillance on all Brass operating Cells that we can reach. But keep it quiet."

"Sure thing, man," Alexei responded.

Garret whirled around and stood face to face with the other young man. "I mean it Alexei," Garret said, his voice flat and expressionless, yet conveying a level of seriousness nonetheless. "Keep it really fucking quiet. Make sure Robert and his guys know that. We're going to go out on this little bunker-busting run and when we get back, I want to get to the bottom of this. Savvy?"

Alexei smiled and nodded, patting Garret on the shoulder. "No worries, man. It's my ass on the line as well, you know, and I want these fuckers as much as you."

Garret smiled back at his friend. "I know, Alexei, I know. But, hey, when you're done with Rob, round up Anton and Pollack and any other bastard who we know would be good on a deep strike and meet me in the Bank in two hours. We've got our work cut out for us."

End
file.